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Op Ed — Crazy Idea # 274:
Just Stop Collecting

by **Rick Anderson** (Director of Resource Acquisition, University of Nevada, Reno Libraries; Phone: 775-784-6500 x273) <rickand@unr.edu>



For as long as there have been libraries, the words “library” and “collection” have been almost interchangeable. The library was the books, or at least the building with the books in it, and without the books, it wouldn’t have been a library. That’s been the case since the earliest libraries were established. Our approaches to patron service and collection management have changed, but what has not changed is the centrality of a permanent collection, gathered and shaped in anticipation of users’ needs, to the very idea of the library itself.

For centuries this made perfect sense, because our information access problems were shaped by **three fundamental truths**:

As individuals, we all needed more information than we could afford. No one had enough money to buy copies of all the information resources he’d ever need, or to store them even if he could. So we all got together as communities, pooled our money, and bought single copies of documents that members of the community could take turns using. The upside of this arrangement was that everyone in the community had more or less equal access to a relatively rich collection; the downsides were, first, that the collection was inevitably incomplete (no library met every patron’s every possible need) and, second, that the collection was stored centrally, which meant that the user had to come to the collection — an arrangement that posed a minor inconvenience to some and made access impossible for others.

Information was slow and expensive to distribute. Another reason for building and maintaining a permanent collection was the slowness and expense of moving printed documents from one place to another. If a patron made a trip to the library to find a book and the book wasn’t there, the library could usually get a copy for her — eventually. But the process was clumsy and slow and expensive, and required the patron to make a return trip to the library at some point in the future, assuming that the book would still be of use to her by that point. Thus, it made sense for a library to build as comprehensive a collection as it

reasonably could, in anticipation of its patrons’ needs. Of course, we couldn’t anticipate patrons’ needs perfectly, which meant that we ended up buying resources that no one wanted and failing to buy resources that they did want.

Relevant information was hard to find. Think back, if you can, to life before the World Wide Web. If you were contemplating a move to Des Moines and wanted to know how many days of sunshine that city has in an average year, or if you wanted to know when the salmon usually run in Katchemak Bay, then you had to make a trip to the library. One important reason for a library collection was to answer these kinds of questions — simple ones, but ones that relied on access to obscure and often costly sources.

In short, throughout human history information has been expensive, unwieldy and obscure. This was partly because information was expensive to create, but also because it was stored and transmitted in printed media.¹ Storing print requires much labor and the investment of significant resources; once printed, the information is difficult, slow and expensive to transport, and can only be searched — if at all — by means of crude indexes, which themselves are very costly to create and which, by their nature, never fully index the texts to which they refer. For centuries, the library offered the best available solution to these problems.

The problem for libraries is that we no longer live in an information world that is fundamentally characterized by expense, unwieldiness and obscurity. While it remains true that some information is expensive and hard to find, and much of it is still trapped in print formats and therefore difficult to distribute, *most of the information that most people need most of the time* is now available in electronic formats. Furthermore, a large and growing percentage of that information is freely available to the public, and zeroing in on the particular nugget of information one needs is easy and getting easier every day. In 2006, just about any ready-reference question can be better (i.e., more quickly, easily and accurately) answered by recourse to the Internet than to a printed book. With online information, the problem of unwieldiness is solved because

physical distribution is no longer necessary. The obscurity problem is largely (if not completely) solved by full-text searchability. The expense problem will always exist, though it’s now mainly a problem for those with deep and complex research needs. Those in need of quick answers to general questions — who formerly had to make the same trip to the library that serious researchers had to make — can now find those answers in seconds without leaving their homes.

All of this raises a serious question for libraries. **If the purpose of a permanent collection is to solve problems that have now largely been solved by forces outside the library, does it still make sense for us to build and maintain permanent collections?** Forgive me as I lapse into business jargon, but why does it make sense to invest (wastefully and at great expense) in a “just-in-case” service model, when a “just-in-time” alternative is available?

This, of course, begs a question. Is a “just-in-time” model really available to libraries? Do we really have the option of abandoning the idea of a permanent collection altogether and instead becoming a real-time, by-the-drink operation that responds immediately and effectively to patrons’ expressed needs?


The answer is no. Not yet. For one thing, we don’t want our patrons to have to talk to a librarian in order to get what they want. One of the beautiful things about a modern library is that you can browse around in it to your heart’s content — we don’t want to go back to the service-counter mode of librarianship, one that requires patrons to supplicate the library staff in order to get what they need. For another thing, our budgets are limited and patrons’ desires are potentially unlimited. If we don’t ration our materials budgets, but leave them at the real-time mercy of the demanding hordes, the money will disappear before everyone’s needs have been met. One virtue of traditional collection development is that it distributes the materials budget in a rational way.

But what if we started moving in that direction? What if we shrank our idea of the collection until it resembled only a hard core of essential titles, titles that we have good reason to believe will get significant use, and thus freed up more of the materials budget to respond to real needs in real time? This would reduce the amount of money we waste on materials no one

continued on page 52

wants, and increase the amount we spend on materials that are actually needed. Not every library could do this in equal degrees, of course: there are some libraries, like **Harvard's**, or the **New York Public Library**, that have missions (and budgets) specifically oriented towards creating and preserving comprehensive, permanent collections. Such collections are not just practical resources for the everyday user, but also monuments to Western civilization, and those collections serve an important purpose in society.

But they are also very much exceptions to the rule. Most libraries, whether public or academic or corporate or "special," have missions that are much more narrowly targeted, with budgets and physical space to match. For the average library to attempt to collect comprehensively and permanently on a "just-in-case" basis makes much less sense in 2006 than it did in 1956 — or even in 1990, before it was clear that the World Wide Web was about to turn the information economy upside down.


Almost all libraries now struggle to house and manage the collections they already have; at the same time, budgets are stagnant, serials inflation flirts with double digits, and new and expensive titles continue to proliferate. The implication seems obvious: when you're out of room and you're out of money, you're going to have to start buying less. Instead of figuring out how to ratchet down the activity of our current acquisition model, perhaps the time has come to move towards a different model altogether. It may well be that the very idea of a comprehensive and permanent library collection has outlived its usefulness. 

Endnotes

1. Except, of course, in those cultures where it was stored mentally and transmitted orally, rendering it even more expensive and obscure, if quite a bit more portable.

cial services, for now at least, provide access to digitized versions of music which started life on CD or vinyl or paper. Libraries could theoretically collaborate to locate, acquire, house, and preserve all or selected recordings represented in these databases, given adequate time and money, regardless of their digitized existence in a commercial database. However, with born-digital music, new techniques to ensure preservation and long-term access will need to be developed. The **Database of Recorded American Music** is an example of the **JSTOR** licensing model. Its content comprises the catalogue of the label **New World Records**, supplemented by music from other labels whose focus is American music. Funded initially by the **Robert Sterling Clark Foundation** and by ongoing support from **The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation**, its market is academic institutions and libraries. Another model is **Alexander Street Press's "Digital Music: Collections to Own,"** which offers libraries the option of an annual license for streamed access, or one-time purchase of audio files from participating record labels' entire catalogues that the library agrees to stream to one user at a time. The purchase includes a hard disk containing an archival copy of the audio files.

Though acknowledging some uncertainty about whether librarians will trust commercial vendors to preserve content and provide access for the long term, **Roger Press** is optimistic about the future. With so many efforts, commercial and non-profit, by **Google** and many others, to digitize the world's information, "one way or another, the information won't disappear off the planet."¹⁶ We need to develop mechanisms for collaborating as librarians, publishers, and vendors to justify **Roger Press's** and **Kevin Kelly's** optimism about the universal library.

Will libraries need to collect music at all, if all music is digitized and part of the universal library? As they have for centuries, libraries acquire music and make it available to their users, including those who cannot otherwise afford it or who lack the required technology to access it. Librarians know how to describe music, organize it for subsequent retrieval, and teach their users to locate and access it. Librarians understand the importance of preservation and long-term access. Until the universal library is truly populated with all the music needed by our user communities... until everyone has affordable, easy access to the universal library and can find what they need when they need it... until we can guarantee that the music will always be available to our users, there will continue to be a role for libraries. 

ATG Interviews Patrick C. Kindregan

Associate Director, Better World Books, www.betterworldbooks.com

by Jack Montgomery (Western Kentucky University) <jack.montgomery@wku.edu>

ATG: Patrick, how did you come to work with Better World Books?

PK: I heard about Better World Books from a college friend, **Dustin Holland** (our current Director). **Dustin** was recruited in 2004 to jump start the Better World Books' Library Discards and Donations Program. I continually followed the incredible progress of the program, and in early 2005 I received word from **Dustin** that he was interested in speaking to me about joining the library team. In early April, I attended the **ACRL** conference in Minneapolis to learn more about Better World Books and the library industry. My new career officially started two weeks after the conference.

ATG: Can you tell us a little bit about the company's history, its founder and its overall business philosophy?

PK: The Story — Better World Books began with a single book drive at the University of Notre Dame in 2001. Organized by re-

cent graduates, the book drive benefited the **Robinson Community Learning Center** in South Bend. Drop boxes placed on campus were soon full of books that would otherwise have been wasted, thrown away in dumpsters, or hauled off to landfills.

Those recent graduates who ran the book drive, **Christopher "Kreece" Fuchs** and **Xavier Helgesen**, along with another of their college friends, **Jeff Kurtzman**, realized two important things with that first book drive. First, there was a huge market for unwanted textbooks to be sold online. Second, college students and members of the community were more interested than ever in making a difference. These three friends seized on the opportunity and began to work spreading literacy locally, nationally and around the world. They founded the social venture that is now **Better World Books**. Their company began to convert unwanted, wasted books into funding for non-profit literacy partners.

The Cause — Worldwide Literacy. One-seventh of the world's population is illiterate (nearly 900 million people). Over 2.6 billion people in the world live on less than \$1 per day. **BWB** is committed to breaking the cycle of poverty and dependency through promoting literacy and education around the globe "one book at a time." **BWB's** core non-profit literacy partners include: **Books for Africa** (www.boooksforafrica.org); **Room to Read** (www.roomtoread.org) and **The National Center for Family Literacy** (www.familit.org). **Better World Books** has contributed over \$750,000 in total funding to over 38 literacy partners.

In addition to active book drives on over 600 campuses nationwide, **Better World Books** has expanded our business model to include libraries and secondhand stores. Since the program's inception in late 2004, over 500 libraries across the U.S. have partnered with **Better World**

continued on page 54